

Violence Against Women and the Role of Religion

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Because religion is a personal and institutional reality in the lives of the majority of the population in the U.S., it is no surprise that religious teaching and affiliation provide a significant context for many women as they address experiences of victimization. Through texts, traditions, teachings, and doctrine, religious communities and institutions convey values and belief systems to their members. In addition, members often have direct support or counseling relationships with religious leaders who may provide guidance or instruction. Religious texts and teachings can serve as resources to assist those who have experienced abuse in finding safety and in the process of healing. Yet, religion also can be misused to excuse or condone abusive behavior. In the context of violence against women, religious teachings and communities will play a role; they will never be neutral.

At the outset, it is important to acknowledge the tremendous diversity of beliefs, teachings, and traditions that exist among the many religions of the world. Within pluralistic societies such as North America, we need to be aware of Roman Catholic, Jewish, Protestant, Orthodox Christian, Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu, Native American or First Nations beliefs and practices, as well as many others. In addition, within any one particular religion, there may exist various denominations, movements or traditions, with their own distinct institutions, cultures and teachings. A comprehensive exploration of the relationship between religion and violence against women is beyond the scope of this article.¹

Yet, there are some basic issues and questions, which confront religiously identified women who

have experienced abuse. It is our intention to address some of these areas of concern. Stated simply, the reality is that regardless of the particular religious affiliation, alongside the trauma of violence, a majority of women will be dealing with some aspect of religious beliefs and teachings which will serve either as a resource or a roadblock (Fortune, 1987).

The task for both religious and secular leadership is twofold: 1) to recognize that religious beliefs, texts, and teachings can serve both as roadblocks and as resources for victims of violence and 2) to deepen our examination of religious texts and teachings and explore new interpretations so that we minimize the roadblocks and maximize the resources for women. No woman should ever be forced to choose between safety and her religious community or tradition. She should be able to access the resources of both community-based advocacy and shelter *and* faith-based support and counsel. For her to do so, she needs these two resources to work collaboratively so that they can provide consistent advocacy and support for victims and survivors and participate in the process of holding perpetrators accountable.

Deconstructing and Reconstructing: What to do with Religious Traditions?

Among the many world religions, Christianity, Judaism, and Islam for example, incorporate beliefs and practices as well as cultures that vary greatly in their impact on women who are victims of violence. We will use these three major world religions common in North America to illustrate the challenges

that religion presents for victims of sexual and domestic violence.

Christianity as Roadblock and Resource. Both the Hebrew Bible and Christian Scriptures contain story after story of violence against women: e.g. Dinah (Genesis 34), Tamar (2 Samuel 13), the Levite's concubine (Judges 19), Jephthah's daughter (Judges 11), Vashti (Esther 1), Suzannah (Daniel 13), and probably the persistent widow in Luke's Gospel (Luke 18)². Later Christian texts also condone male violence against women and the domination of women. For example, the right of chastisement was the enforcer of women's subordination in marriage. In the "Rules of Marriage" compiled by Friar Cherubino in the 15th century (Bussert, 1986) we find the careful instruction to a husband to first reprimand his wife; "And if this still doesn't work . . . take up a stick and beat her soundly . . . for it is better to punish the body and correct the soul than to damage the soul and spare the body" (p. 13).

Unfortunately, this doctrine has been viewed as consistent with scriptural passages interpreted to confirm male dominance over women: "Wives be subject to your husbands as you are to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife just as Christ is the head of the church, the body of which he is the Savior. Just as the church is subject to Christ, so also wives ought to be, in everything, to their husbands" (Ephesians 5.22-24 NRSV). Either by its silence or its instruction, the church has too often communicated to battered women that they should stay in abusive relationships, try to be better wives, and "forgive and forget." To batterers, it has communicated that their efforts to control their wives or girlfriends are justified because women are to be subject to men in all things. They have been permitted to "discipline" their wives and their children all for the "good of the family." Christian history is filled with examples of church leaders justifying abuse of women by men. Church fathers like Martin Luther unapologetically described their own physical violence towards their wives (Smith, 1911).

In dealing with domestic violence, however, the Christian scriptural justifications for women remain-

ing in abusive relationships (subordination in marriage, e.g. Ephesians 5:20; prohibition of divorce, e.g. Malachi 2:13-16) must be considered in the fuller context of ethics, theology, and doctrine. Prooftexting (the selective use of a text, usually out of context, to support one's position) is a common ploy by those who seek to simply justify their actions. It is not difficult to prooftext a man's prerogative to dominate and control a woman within patriarchal western religious traditions. But it nonetheless does not represent the whole story. For example, in Jesus' ministry, he teaches: "The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly" (John 10:10, NRSV). Victimization is never God's will but rather fullness of life. Jesus understood his ministry "to proclaim release to the captives . . ." (Luke 4:18 quoting Isaiah 61, NRSV). He told the story of the Good Samaritan to emphasize our responsibility to stop and care for the victim. These are fundamental teachings through which other passages must be interpreted in Christianity.

Judaism as Roadblock and Resource. Both the family and the home have been central to Jewish religious and cultural life. *Shalom bayit* (peace in the home) is an important Jewish value; it refers to an ideal state—a harmonious home in which all who dwell within are nurtured and respected. Yet the concept of *shalom bayit* has been misused by some who place on women the sole responsibility for maintaining peace in the home and even has been used to pressure women to remain in or return to homes in which they have been the victims of abuse. *Shalom bayit* as a value and ideal to be worked towards should not be confused with the "myth of the perfect Jewish family," in which abuse as well as other problems have been covered up and seen as sources of shame.

In addition, although *shalom bayit* is an important Jewish value, it does not have priority over taking action to save a life. Judaism recognizes all human beings, male and female, as created *b' tzelem elohim* (in the image of God) (see Genesis 1:27). *Pikuach nefesh* (taking action to save a life) is of the utmost importance in Jewish tradition. The

Talmud teaches that “a person who saves a life is as one who has saved an entire world” (Talmud, Sanhedrin 37a). Judaism serves as a resource for women who have experienced abuse when *pikuach nefesh* is taught and remembered to be a sacred obligation, taking precedence over *shalom bayit*, particularly when the home is not a place of peace, but rather a place in which violence is being perpetrated.

Islam as Roadblock and Resource. Within Islam, we also find texts and interpretations of texts that have been used by abusive men to justify their behavior. According to Muslim scholar and activist Sharifa Alkhateeb (1999):

The most abused verse is ayah 34 of Surah four: “Men are the protectors and maintainers of women because Allah gave more to the one than the other, and because they support them from their means. So devout women are extremely careful and attentive in guarding what cannot be seen in that which Allah is extremely careful and attentive in guarding. Concerning women whose rebellious disloyalty (nusbooz) you fear, admonish them, then refuse to share their beds, then hit them; but if they become obedient, do not seek means of annoyance against them. For Allah is Most High, Great” (pp. 54-55).

Alkhateeb (1999) argues that this passage instructs Muslim men to financially and physically protect women (given their greater physical strength) and instructs Muslim women to guard their fidelity in obedience to Allah. She points out that to translate the word “to hit” contradicts the explicit teachings of the Prophet:

Some translators assert that it is incorrect to translate the word “hit” at all, based on the Prophet’s lifelong abhorrence of hitting—found in the hadith collections of Abu Daud, Nasa’I, Ibn Hibban, and Bayhaqi, and in his instruction in his last sermon where he restricted striking to a light tap (*gbayr mubarrih*—without causing

pain) only if the wife has become guilty of *nusbooz*, obvious immoral conduct (p. 55).

Then Alkhateeb (1999) concludes:

The wording of this verse emphasizes the woman’s obedience to Allah’s desires, and not to those of another human being, but those who misinterpret this verse would assign men the duty of being eternal surveillance police over their wives. . . . In short, this verse has been used as a tool of control and abuse completely opposed to the Islamic foundation of marriage and family (p. 55).

In contrast, Alkhateeb (1999) points out that in the Qur’an, the marital relationship specifically is mandated to be one of “mutual kindness and mercy (30:21; 9:71)” (p. 53). Muslim women keep their own names when they marry and have a right to a marriage contract in which they can specify their expectations of fair treatment.

No human being has ultimate authority over women. . . . Islam actually requires kindness, politeness, consideration, gentleness, respect and general goodness to women. . . . The current unjust practices to women represent ignorance of the religion rather than an example of the religion (Alkhateeb, 2003, pp. 7-8).

In other words, the resources are many to challenge the roadblocks.

Transforming Roadblocks into Resources.

Early in the development of religious responses to sexual and domestic violence, Bussert (1986) clearly stated the agenda: “We need . . . to begin articulating a faith that will provide women with resources for strength rather than resources for endurance. We must articulate a theology of empowerment rather than a theology of passive endurance” (p. 65). This needed approach requires a critique (or deconstruction) of the roadblocks that have been created by patriarchal interpretations of religious teachings, and the development (or recon-

struction) of useful resources that empower victims and survivors to address their experiences.

Although Christianity, Judaism, and Islam all state as a core value the preservation of marriage and the family, an underlying purpose behind the application of texts and teachings on marriage and family often has been the preservation of male control of women and children within a patriarchal system. At times, this has come at the expense of women's safety. Thus we have seen centuries of "religion in service to patriarchy" rather than serving as a challenge to the dominant social norms which have perpetuated violence against women.

Celebrating Narratives

Tragically, a critical look at the history of much of our collective religious teaching makes clear that religious institutions have explicitly or implicitly shaped the context of values which have tolerated violence against women. Indeed, examples of violence against and the silencing of women appear in many places in authoritative texts of our religious traditions. Yet there also exist persistent sources within our various traditions which, when explored and given voice, offer powerful resources for strength and courage, as well as compassion and justice for those who have been harmed by the acts of another in the community.

The book of Esther in the Hebrew Bible is one such example. Everything is topsy-turvy in this biblical text. The men are portrayed as evil or stupid. The women are strong. The book begins with Queen Vashti's refusal to appear before her drunken husband (the king) to "display her beauty to the peoples and the officials" (see, Esther 1:11, translation by Jewish Publication Society). Vashti's refusal enraged the king, who worried that if people found out that the queen had disobeyed him, then other wives might disobey their husbands and chaos would ensue. The king banished Vashti and found a new queen, Esther. Esther, a Jew, was not known to be a Jew when she became queen. Then, at the behest of his aide Haman, a hater of Jews, the king signed an edict declaring that on a certain date all Jews under his domain would be killed. Esther,

though fearing for her life, revealed to her husband that she was a Jew and would be killed under the edict. As a result of Esther's courageous act, the king issued a superceding edict, in which Haman would be killed, rather than the Jews. The book of Esther is read each year on the Jewish holiday of Purim. Esther's courage is joyously celebrated. The biblical characters, Vashti and Esther, remind us that women always have engaged in acts of resistance to male violence and domination.

Other powerful examples of courageous women who engaged in acts of resistance to male violence and domination appear in the Bible. For example, in the book of Exodus, though instructed by the pharaoh of Egypt to kill all male Hebrew babies, the midwives, Shifra and Puah, acted with courage and refused to do so (Exodus 1:15-21). Another exception is the story of Susannah, in which two elders in the community sexually harass Susannah. When she resists, they falsely accuse her of adultery in order to save themselves. Daniel appears on the scene to defend her and indict the elders (Daniel 13). Unfortunately, however, this story is contained within the Apocrypha but not the biblical canon. Thus, it is unfamiliar to most people.

In Christian scripture, Jesus tells the story of the persistent widow who goes to the unjust judge to be vindicated for some unnamed offense against her. He refuses and sends her away until finally he vindicates her because he tires of her bothering him. Her strength and persistence result in her receiving the justice she deserved.

In Islam, Alkhateeb (2002) points out that texts that should challenge the community to support battered women are often not seen as relevant to marriage:

For instance, the verse "Allah (God) loves not that evil should be noised abroad in public speech, except where injustice has been done: for Allah (God) Hears and Knows all things" (4:148), is a clear permission to speak openly about injustice on any issue including marital abuse (p. 18).

Resources such as these from Christianity, Judaism, and Islam can help to transform the way that battered women are treated in their communities.

Violence as Sin

Beyond highlighting and celebrating those religious narratives and texts in which women serve as strong and courageous role models, however, we need to understand and teach that, theologically and ethically, sexual and domestic violence constitute sin—the physical, psychological, and spiritual violation of one person by another. As such it violates the bodily integrity of the victim and shatters the possibility of right relationship between the victim and abuser. Any form of personal violence destroys trust in the other person (when perpetrated by an acquaintance or family member) and trust in the basic security of one's world (when perpetrated either by a stranger or a person one knows). The secondary effect is to isolate or cut the victim off from her community. This, too, is a sin.

Our culture does not take violence against women seriously. Yet to assert that violence against women is unacceptable is consistent with the portrayal of God, e.g., in Hebrew and Christian scriptures as one who stands with the vulnerable and powerless and speaks judgment against those who choose to use their power in ways that harm others. (See, Hebrew Bible, Leviticus 19:9-10, 14; Isaiah 58:6-7; See, Christian Scripture, Luke 17:1-2).

Contemporary Context: Moving from Mistrust to Collaboration

To adequately respond to the needs of battered women and rape victims, it is imperative that clergy learn about domestic violence and reach out to secular advocates and services. Likewise, it is imperative that secular advocates and counselors appreciate the importance of women's religious backgrounds and reach out to clergy and religious groups to find resources to meet the needs of victims. Ill-informed religious leaders *or* advocates can present major roadblocks to victims of violence.

A history of mistrust has developed in response to simplistic assumptions or erroneous beliefs on both sides of this equation. A religious leader may see a secular shelter as "breaking up families" or "undermining a woman's faith." A secular advocate may see a religious leader as "sexist" or "endangering a woman's safety." Breaking through this mistrust requires risk-taking and initiative from both sides and a shared commitment to the well being of the victim or survivor. If we can stay focused on her, we quickly realize that we alone cannot provide all that she needs. Each of us as helpers needs the resources of others in our community to empower her to be safe and to find the healing she needs. Religious leaders collaborating with advocates can provide the resources essential to safety and healing.

Secular advocates can seek out and build relationships with trusted religious leaders, offering training and support. In building a network in a community, advocates will then have valuable resources for referral when battered women or rape victims need to discuss their religious or spiritual concerns. They will also gain support for their organizations through active board members and funders.

Religious leaders also can utilize their positions as community leaders to help shape the discussion of issues concerning violence against women. Most clergy have weekly access to a congregation where, in the context of religious teaching, they can educate and advocate for ending violence against women. They can write letters to the editor, discuss public policy and funding issues, and support organizations that serve victims. Congregations can work to insure that they are safe places for adults and children and can partner with local agencies to provide volunteers, meeting space, and financial support. Seminaries can train students to identify sexual and domestic violence, to respond appropriately, and to utilize community resources whenever possible.

In addition, training is very useful for identifying allies and building collaborative relationships between secular advocates and religious leaders in the community. Training for religious leaders should include religious allies in the planning and should

focus on the basics of the issues, as well as how to make appropriate referrals and work together with secular advocates and counselors (Fortune, 1991). Training for advocates should include addressing the religious concerns that women may present and how to make appropriate referrals to religious resources.

If we are to succeed in the goal which Bussert (1986) asserts, “articulating a faith that will provide women with resources for strength rather than resources for endurance” (p.65), we must work where we are to maximize women’s resources and minimize the roadblocks that either our religious or secular efforts may offer. This is our challenge. It is also our sacred obligation. “If not now, when?” (Mishnah, Avot 1:14).

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Endnotes

¹ See also: Marie Fortune (1983) *Sexual Violence: The Unmentionable Sin*; Julie Spitzer (1985) *Spousal Abuse in Rabbinic and Contemporary Judaism*; James Poling (1991) *The Abuse of Power*; Carol Adams (1994) *Woman-Battering*; Carol Adams & Marie Fortune (1995) *Violence Against Women: A Christian Theological Sourcebook*; Pamela Cooper-White (1995) *The Cry of Tamar*; Nancy Nason-Clark (1997) *The Battered Wife*; Toinette M. Eugene & James Poling (1998) *Balm for Gilead*; Naomi Graetz (1998) *Silence is Deadly: Judaism Confronts Wifebeating*; Abraham Twersky (1996) *The Shame Born In Silence: Spouse Abuse in the Jewish Community*; Marie Fortune (1995) *Love Does No Harm*; John McClure & Nancy Ramsey (1998) *Telling the Truth: Preaching About Sexual and Domestic Violence*.

² Genesis 34, 2 Samuel 13, Judges 11 and 19, and Esther 1 are all found in the Hebrew Bible. Luke 18 is part of Christian Scripture. While the book of Daniel is part of the Hebrew Bible, only chapters 1-12 are contained within the biblical canon. Chapter 13 appears in the Christian Apocrypha. It is important to note that while both Jews and Christians regard the Hebrew Bible (referred to by Christians as Hebrew Scripture) as authoritative text, the ways in which Jews and Christians may read scriptural text or particular passages may vary enormously. Irrespective of reading strategy, historical and theological lenses, however, the biblical text is loaded with narratives describing violence against women.

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Suggested Citation: Fortune, M. & Enger, C. (2006, March). *Violence Against Women and the Role of Religion*. Harrisburg, PA: VAWnet, a project of the National Resource Center on Domestic Violence/Pennsylvania Coalition Against Domestic Violence. Retrieved month/day/year, from: <http://www.vawnet.org>

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**In-Brief:
Violence Against Women and the Role of Religion**

Religion is a personal and institutional reality in the lives of the majority of the population in the U.S., so it is no surprise that religious teaching and affiliation provide a significant context for many women as they address experiences of victimization. Through texts, traditions, teachings and doctrine, religious communities and institutions convey values and belief systems to their members. In addition, members often have direct support or counseling relationships with religious leaders who may provide guidance or instruction. Religious texts and teachings can serve as resources to assist those who have experienced abuse in finding safety and in the process of healing. Yet, religion also can be misused to excuse or condone abusive behavior. In the context of violence against women, religious teachings and communities will play a role; they will never be neutral.

This document covers some of the basic issues and questions that confront religiously identified women who have experienced abuse. The reality is that regardless of the particular religious affiliation, alongside the trauma of violence, a majority of women will be dealing with some aspect of religious beliefs and teachings which will serve either as a resource or a roadblock (Fortune, 1987).

The task for both religious and secular leadership is twofold: 1) to recognize that religious beliefs, texts, and teachings can serve both as roadblocks and as resources for victims of violence and 2) to deepen our examination of religious texts and teachings and explore new interpretations so that we minimize the roadblocks and maximize the resources for women. No woman should ever be forced to choose between safety and her religious community or tradition. She should be able to access the resources of both community-based advocacy and shelter *and* faith-based support and counsel.

To adequately respond to the needs of battered women and rape victims, it is imperative that clergy learn about violence against women and reach out to secular advocates and services. Likewise, it is imperative that secular advocates and counselors appreciate the importance of women's religious backgrounds and reach out to clergy and religious groups to find resources to meet the needs of victims. Religious leaders also can utilize their positions as community leaders to help shape the discussion of issues concerning violence against women.